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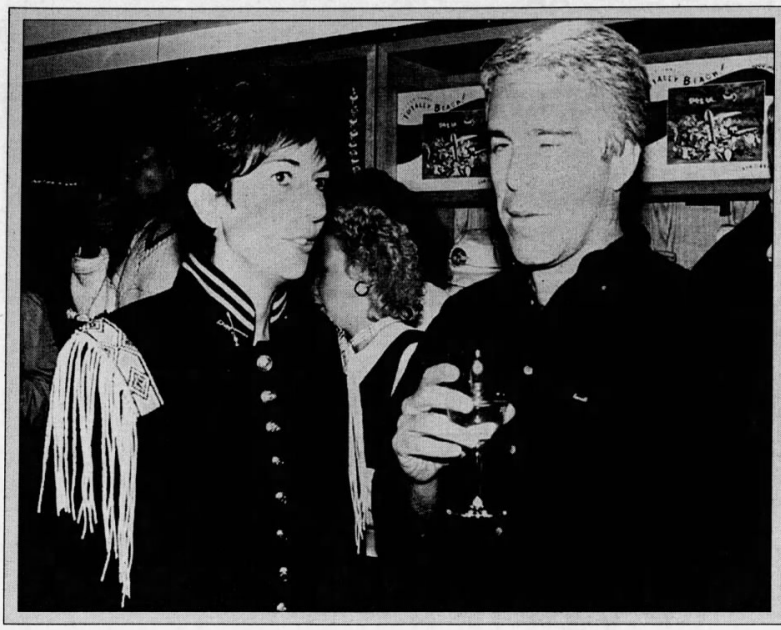

Ghislaine at a party with her partner, Jeffrey Epstein, on whom "her dependence is pretty total". TOP: with her father, who made her a director of Oxford United. ABOVE: the boat that Robert Maxwell named after her and on which she allegedly destroyed papers after his death

The return of Ghislaine

Daddy's girl Ghislaine Maxwell has kept a low profile in Britain since her late father stole £440 million. But now she's back – and throwing a lavish party at one of London's most expensive hotels. **MARCUS SCRIVEN** explores the motives of a woman who has always enjoyed the company of men

NOT LONG after her father's theft of £440 million from the Mirror Group pension fund became known, Ghislaine Maxwell returned to England but not without taking one precaution. She wore a platinum-blonde wig. Since then, though less concerned to preserve her anonymity, she has tried to avoid drawing attention to herself when here for the weddings of friends, whether old Oxford ones like Charlie Money-Kyrle or newer ones like Tania Bryer, or, most recently, for the engagement party of Lady Teresa Manners.

Indeed, it is this consistent vein of self-restraint which makes her decision to hold a party in London on 5 July so intriguing; some suggest that, at the age of 35, she is about to marry.

Her choice of hotel — The Hempel, the new, palpitatingly expensive place in Paddington — is scarcely understated.

In New York, such an arrangement would have been of marginal significance: there, Ghislaine has found, to her delight, that she can do as she pleases, without fear of censure. On this side of the Atlantic, by contrast, she knows that the sight of a Maxwell (any Maxwell) living it up provokes fury and contempt, although she gives no indication of understanding why this is (just as, earlier this year, in her first interview since her father's death, she could not manage even a murmur of pity for those whom Maxwell bullied, humiliated or defrauded).

The party, in consequence, seems to signal, at the very least, an emphatic change of style — or, more dramatically, marriage, presumably to Jeffrey Epstein, on whom (an English friend has been reported as saying) "her dependence is pretty total".

In her recent interview, Ghislaine remarked that having three brothers, as well as having been to Marlborough and a predominantly male college (Balliol), meant that she had "always had men friends". But since 1992, Epstein, a character with an opaque professional past and a definite social reputation (Cosmopolitan once nominated him its bachelor of the month), has been pre-eminent among them.

"He is a strange man," one friend has said. "Not dislikable but difficult to understand. He can treat her very well or very badly. He can be impatient, demanding and extremely critical of her. At the same time he is kind and protective."

Robert Maxwell comes irresistibly to mind. As was the case with Maxwell, the origins of Epstein's wealth (he numbers a million-pound lair in Palm Beach among his possessions) are not exactly clear. Some say that he once taught maths at a private school for girls; others, that he was a concert pianist. Nowadays, he is vaguely described as a "property developer". He is also said to have worked for the CIA, or even spied for Mossad, the Israeli secret service.

Such speculation is not entirely ridiculous: an acquaintance remembers how Epstein presented an unusual gift to a mutual English friend. "It was a New York police-issue riot shotgun — one of those pump-action things. How he managed to produce it I have no idea, but he definitely did." The recipient, she adds, was the son of an arms dealer.

Maxwell, one feels, would have understood, just as he would have understood Epstein's apparently uneven treatment of Ghislaine. That, after all, was very much Maxwell's way with his ninth and youngest child.

Like the rest of his children, she was in awe of him. Oxford friends whom she invited to swim at Headington Hall recall how she, like them, would hurry from the pool when servants warned of his approach. "When he was on his way, we were told to get out," recalls a guest. "He couldn't bear having anyone in his space." Nor could he bear ignorance in his expensively educated children, whom he interrogated at meal times. "He could be very frightening," Ghislaine agreed in her recent interview. "It wasn't often that you would say 'no' to him."

Yet if anyone was Daddy's girl it was Ghislaine. Maxwell made her a director of Oxford United; later, when he bought the New York Daily News, she was put in charge of "special projects". Then there were the indulgences of which the public did not know, like the Daimler which arrived at the house she shared with five others in Oxford to disgorge a team of Filipino servants who swarmed through, cleaning the kitchen, laying the table and putting the pre-cooked dinner into the oven for the party Ghislaine was about to give; or the paternal assistance she received in running her company, Maxwell Corporate Gifts.

"She used to entertain men friends for lunch in the Mirror Group building," recalls one of them. "There was a private dining room for two. You had a luxurious lunch, and heard Captain Bob landing his helicopter above you. You were undoubtedly meant to buy masses of corporate gifts."

DESPITE her association with Epstein, now in its fifth year, it is possible that Ghislaine could pull off a still bigger surprise on 5 July, by getting married — but not to him. She has, after all, always approached men in a spirit of adventure. In New York, her flirtatiousness — her willingness, as one observer put it, "to make the first move" — soon marked her out. Perhaps she had got into practice at Oxford. On one occasion there, she turned up while an all-male club was having its annual photograph taken and sat cross-legged on the grass in front of 130 men, apparently stimulated rather than appalled by the ribaldry that her pose inspired.

On another, boys from the Bullingdon dining club burst into an American's rooms at six in the morning (their first attempt had led to their confinement in the cells for the night).

Their target, whom they were intent on electing to their club, was caught completely unawares. So, too, was the other person in the bed. But Ghislaine swiftly recovered. "She seemed to enjoy it," remembers one who was among the insurgents on that Oxford night.

It would surprise few, if any, of those who have come across Ghislaine over the years to hear that she had coped well when engulfed by male company — half-cut and wholly indifferent to female sensibility though that company may have been.

For while she may lack her brother Ian's charm or Kevin's edge, she has undoubted qualities, her father's energy and resilience among them. Nor is her loyalty in doubt. Her father, she believes, was murdered — and, consequently, cannot be blamed for how things "unfolded" afterwards. It is a neat evasion, based on the assumption that Daddy, had he lived, would have put everything right, despite the evidence which suggests that he had irretrievably lost control of events.

But, perhaps above all, there is Ghislaine's instinct for knowing what has to be done.

John Jackson, a Daily Mirror journalist, was aboard the Lady Ghislaine, the yacht which bore her name, two nights after Maxwell's death. Later he claimed that he had watched as she "rifled drawers and cabinets, plucking documents from them indiscriminately" and shouted to the crew "all this must be shredded". Ghislaine denied that this happened; Jackson retracted not a single word.

Just as the young American discovered when the Bullingdon dining club broke into his rooms, Ghislaine does not squeal, however unexpected the circumstances. It is easy to imagine why Jeffrey Epstein, now 44 — or 54, depending on whom you believe — might want a wife like that.

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